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ABSTRACT

Previous research had concluded that a female's relationship with her father was of singular importance in regard to her suicidal risk. This study was designed to test this assumption, and it was hypothesized that the relationship that an adolescent or young adult female had with her mother would be of equal importance in predicting risk for a suicide attempt. Additionally, the study was designed to provide data concerning a variety of other social and demographic factors as they related to risk for suicide attempts. Female college students (N=161) served as subjects. Each subject responded to a 264-item questionnaire concerning suicidal behavior and suicidal thinking. Fifteen subjects reported that they had made a suicide attempt. Both the relationship with the father and the relationship with the mother proved to discriminate between attempters and nonattempters; however, relationship with the father was of less predictive value than relationship with mother. The data provide tentative support for contagion being a factor in females' risk for suicide attempts. Significantly more attempters, 80%, personally knew someone who committed suicide than did nonattempters. Qualitative feedback suggests that college students need information on how to react to and assist a person at suicidal risk.
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RISK FACTORS ASSOCIATED WITH SUICIDE ATTEMPTS BY COLLEGE FEMALES

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ABSTRACT

Previous research had concluded that a female's relationship with her father was of singular importance in regard to her suicidal risk. This study was designed to test this assumption, and it was hypothesized that the relationship that an adolescent or young adult female had with her mother would be of equal importance in predicting risk for a suicide attempt. Additionally, the study was designed to provide data concerning a variety of other social and demographic factors as they related to risk for suicide attempts. One hundred and sixty-one female college students served as subjects. Each responded to a 264 item questionnaire concerning suicidal behavior and suicidal thinking. Fifteen subjects reported that they had made a suicide attempt. Both the relationship with the father and the relationship with the mother proved to discriminate between attempters and nonattempters; however, relationship with the father was of less predictive value than relationship with mother. The data provided tentative support for contagion being a factor in females' risk for suicide attempts. Significantly more attempters, 80%, personally knew someone who committed suicide than nonattempters, 45%- $\chi^2(1, N=161)=6.86, p<.01$. Based on qualitative feedback we found that college students need information on how to react to and assist a person at suicidal risk.

RISK FACTORS ASSOCIATED WITH SUICIDE ATTEMPTS BE COLLEGE FEMALES

Suicide is a serious problem in our society. In the past twenty years there has been a dramatic rise in suicide completions among teens and young adults (NIMH, 1985). Despite the importance of this problem we have only scattered information concerning the epidemiology and etiology of youth suicide. It is the purpose of this paper to add to that body of knowledge. In particular we will be focusing on risk for suicide attempts among female college students.

Too often college students are studied to provide validation for models or to supply data which in turn is generalized to the wider population without taking into consideration the idiosyncratic features which separate college students from the broader population. On the other hand, not often enough are college students studied as a group which has significant problems which require rectification or amelioration. Suicide is one such problem which demands additional attention. The rationale for this concern is based in part on the facts that at least three U.S. college students commit suicide each day (Knott, 1973), and that suicide is the second leading cause of death among college students (Ross, 1968).

There is little doubt that the college student population is a special and privileged one. This makes the phenomenon of college suicide all the more puzzling and contradictory. There have been only a few studies which have focused on suicidal behavior in the

nonpsychiatric population of young adults; however, these few studies have shown that suicidal thoughts and behaviors occur frequently and consistently within this population. Cavan (1965) found that of 134 young persons of different backgrounds only 19% indicated that they had never thought of suicide or wished for death. Lester (1968) reported that of 43 psychology students, 39 indicated they had varying degrees of suicidal thoughts, with five having attempted suicide, five threatening suicide, and 19 considering suicide. Leonard and Flinn (1972) reported high rates of suicidal thoughts and behaviors among their young population, which included 352 college students from varying majors and 128 Airforce basic trainees. This study revealed 56% reporting no suicidal thinking, 8% reporting nonserious threats and gestures and 10% reporting serious suicidal thoughts or serious attempts. In addition, 59% reported experience with suicidal behavior in others. In another attempt to obtain data concerning the suicide risk of college students Mishara, Baker, and Mishara (1976) studied a sample of 293 university students, they found a prevalence rate of 15% having attempted suicide at some time in the past. They state that this rate was over ten times the highest estimated annual rate for the general population. They also found 65% reported that on at least one past occasion they had thought about attempting suicide.

The present study attempts to elucidate some of these findings by providing a more detailed examination of some of the risk factors associated with suicide attempts in a college population, specifically college females. Attitudes toward suicide, suicidal behavior, experience with suicidal others, and family information

were obtained from an extended questionnaire. An area of major concentration was that of a female's relationship with her parents and the differential contribution of her relationship with her mother versus her father as possible factors associated with suicidal risk. Cantor (1972) concluded that a female's relationship with her father was associated with suicidal risk, while completely ignoring the role of a female's relationship with her mother. It was hypothesized in this study that both the relationship with the mother and the relationship with the father would be of predictive significance in regard to risk for a suicide attempt. The issue of contagion was also explored, as were epidemiological variables associated with suicide attempts by college females.

Method

Subjects

One hundred sixty-one female college students from Stephen F. Austin State University served as the subjects for this study. Subjects were enrolled in introductory psychology courses. Freshmen through senior classifications were represented, with the median classification being sophomore. The participants were of varying hometowns, with three quarters growing up in urban areas. Nearly 90% of these urban subjects were from the Dallas-Ft. Worth and Houston areas. Approximately one quarter of the subjects came from rural backgrounds with most of these coming from farms and communities in the East Texas area.

Apparatus and Procedure

Subject participation was voluntary and anonymity was assured. Each student was asked to respond to an extended questionnaire concerning suicidal thinking and suicidal behavior. The questionnaire consisted of 264 items and requested demographic data, information regarding family and the student's relationships with their family, specific information regarding suicidal thoughts and suicidal behavior, and whether or not the subject had known or dealt with others who had suicidal thoughts or behaviors.

RESULTS

Subjects were classified as attempters or nonattempters by way of their answer to several questions which requested information concerning suicide attempts. Of the 161 subjects, 15 consistently reported having made a suicide attempt, 9% of the sampled population.

Chi-square analyses of attempters versus nonattempters were then performed for each item of the questionnaire. For the items concerning family relationships the data were coded for the chi-squares into a 2x2 matrix. Here comparisons were made between those who rated their relationships as troubled or problematic and those who indicated that their relationships were generally positive.

When asked to characterize their relationship with their father during adolescence, attempters responded significantly more negatively than nonattempters, $X^2(1, N=154)=5.73, p<.05$. Twenty-six percent of the attempters characterized their relationship with

their father as generally just right; however, 26% described their father as generally indifferent, 20% said their father was generally weak or ineffectual, and 20% described their father as generally overprotective. Six percent said their relationship was generally hostile. Of the nonattempters, 57% said their relationship with their father was generally just right, 18% reported generally overprotective, with 7% reporting generally indifferent, 12% generally weak or ineffectual father, and 2% reported hostility.

The chi-square analysis of attempters and nonattempters regarding their relationship with their mother during adolescence proved significant, $X^2(1, N=158)=8.55, p<.01$. Thirty-three percent of the attempters reported a just right relationship, while 20% reported overprotectiveness, indifference, and weak or ineffectual relationships. Six percent reported a hostile relationship. Of the nonattempters 69% reported a just right relationship with mother and 18% reported overprotectiveness. Six percent reported an indifferent relationship, 2% reported weak or ineffectual relationships, and 2% reported hostility.

Attempters and nonattempters did differ significantly with regard to reported difficulty in talking to their father about their problems, $X^2(1, N=153)=4.67, p<.05$. Thirteen percent of the attempters found it easy to talk to their father about their problems with 60% finding it difficult and 26% finding it impossible. With regard to the nonattempters, 40% found it easy to talk with their father, 44% found it difficult, and 12% found it impossible.

Attempters and nonattempters differed significantly in regard

to reported difficulty in talking with their mother about their problems, $X^2(1, N=156)=17.51, p<.001$. Twenty percent of the attempters found it easy to talk with mother about their problems, as opposed to 72% of the nonattempters. Fifty-three percent of the attempters found talking with their mother difficult; where as, 24% of the nonattempters found this difficult. Two percent of the nonattempters found it impossible to talk to their mothers while 26% of the attempters found it impossible to do so.

When the subjects were asked to describe their relationship with their father during adolescence, the attempters varied significantly from the nonattempters, $X^2(1, N=154)=3.89, p<.05$. Twenty-one percent of the attempters said there was little, if any, conflict between themselves and their fathers while 49% of the nonattempters reported little conflict. Forty-three percent of the attempters reported some conflict with their father and 35% of the nonattempters reported this. Sixteen percent of the nonattempters reported a good deal of conflict with their father while 36% of the attempters reported a good deal of conflict.

Significant differences were also obtained between the attempters and the nonattempters when asked about their relationship during adolescence with their mother, $X^2(1, N=159)=8.72, p<.01$. Forty-eight percent of the nonattempters reported little, if any, conflict with their mother versus 20% of the attempters who reported little, if any, conflict. Thirty-nine percent of the nonattempters and 40% of the attempters reported some conflict and 11% of the nonattempters and 40% of the attempters reported a good deal of conflict.

When asked if, in times of stress, the subjects usually go to their parents for help, attempters again differed significantly from nonattempters, $X^2(1, N=160)=5.54, p<.05$. Fifty-three percent of the attempters reported that they did not go to their parents for help while 24% of the nonattempters said they did not seek help from their parents. There were no statistically significant differences with regard to preference for one parent or the other.

When asked who was most often the source of conflict or anger for the subject, mother, father, boyfriend/husband, or brother/sister, though not significant, 40% of the attempters answered mother compared with 26% of the nonattempters. The nonattempters answers were distributed evenly, 26%, 22%, 24%, and 26% respectively. Where as, 40% of the attempters regarded mother as most often the source of conflict or anger, 13% regarded their father as the source, 26% indicated boyfriend/husband, and 20% answered brother/sister.

When asked if they had ever drunk excessively attempters were significantly more likely to have done so than the nonattempters, $X^2(1, N=161)=8.05, p<.01$. Ninety-three percent of the attempters reported having drunk excessively compared to 55% of the nonattempters.

Attempters were significantly more likely to report having taken drugs excessively than the nonattempters, $X^2(1, N=161)=6.64, p<.01$. Thirty-three percent of the attempters reported having taken drugs excessively compared to 10% of the nonattempters.

When asked if they had carelessly walked into moving traffic, the attempters were significantly more likely to have done so than

the nonattempters, $X^2(1, N=161)=12.64, p<.001$. Six percent of the nonattempters indicated they had walked into moving traffic while 33% of the attempters reported doing so.

Attempters were significantly more likely to have driven recklessly than the nonattempters, $X^2(1, N=161)=9.79, p<.01$. Sixty-six percent of the attempters reported having driven recklessly compared with 27% of the nonattempters.

Although there was no significant difference between the attempters and the nonattempters when asked if they had ever wished they were dead, the quantitative differences were notable. Seventy-three percent of the attempters reported having wished they were dead, and 55% of the nonattempters indicated the same.

Subjects were asked if they had ever had to deal with or help a person who was at suicidal risk. The nonattempters were significantly more likely to report having done this than the attempters, $X^2(1, N=161)=7.15, p<.01$. Sixty-two percent of the nonattempters reported dealing with a person at suicidal risk, compared to 26% of the attempters.

When asked if they knew anyone who had ended their life through suicide, the attempters were significantly more likely to state they knew someone who did than the nonattempters, $X^2(1, N=161)=6.86, p<.01$. Eighty percent of the attempters responded that they knew someone who had committed suicide, compared to 45% of the nonattempters.

Attempters were significantly more likely than nonattempters to have discussed suicide as a topic with a friend during the past year, $X^2(5, N=161)=14.59, p<.05$. Forty percent of the attempters reported they did occasionally and 26% reported they did so

frequently. Nonattempters reported 22% and 4% respectively.

The attempters were significantly more likely to state that during times of great stress that they thought about attempting suicide in order to kill themselves, $X^2(1, N=160)=23.33, p<.001$, and to think about suicide in order to either call attention to their problems or to get help, $X^2(1, N=161)=18.40, p<.001$, than were the nonattempters in the same situation. When asked if they had used suicide as a threat, the attempters were significantly more likely to report having used suicide as a threat than were the nonattempters, $X^2(1, N=159)=7.19, p<.01$.

Concerning the seriousness of their suicide attempts ten of the 15 attempters described their attempt as putting their life in danger. Seven of the attempters reported receiving counseling, medical intervention, or hospitalization following their attempt. Of the 15 attempters six reported that they never hoped to be discovered and nine responded that they had wanted to be discovered. Following their attempts seven reported that they were not discovered and eight reported that they were discovered. Four of the attempters who were not discovered reported having told someone since the attempt occurred. Of the attempters who were discovered two reported feeling embarrassed or stupid, three said they felt pleased because they received the attention they wanted, and one reported feeling guilty. Of these six attempters, when asked how they feel about their attempt now, three reported that they got what they wanted and three said they were embarrassed.

When asked if they had ever talked to someone about a suicide attempt which they were planning or had made, one of the attempters

reported talking to someone before and after their attempt, 10 of the attempters reported talking to someone after but not before their attempt, and one reported that this was the first time she had shared her attempt with anyone. Of those who identified who they spoke to six reported talking to their friends, one to a counselor, and one to her father. Two of the people who had talked to someone felt that the other person did not understand their situation, three felt guilty, and two said they felt they had their life in order.

When asked if they felt they were at suicide risk in the future, six of the attempters felt they were at no future risk, five felt their risk was very little, two indicated their risk was about the same as others, and two felt they were at more risk than others. Of the nonattempters 67% stated they were at no risk, 25% felt they were at very little suicidal risk, and 6% felt they were about the same as others, and 2% did not respond.

DISCUSSION

Of the 161 subjects in this study 15 reported that they had made a suicide attempt. The percentage of respondents reporting a suicide attempt (9%) is somewhat lower than that found by Mishara et. al. (15%). However, it is quite close to that revealed by an earlier study on this same campus. In the preceding study Campana, Gibson, Bailey and Lackey (1985) had found that of 43 female college students five reported a suicide attempt. In any case, this shows that suicidal behavior is a significant problem among college females and deserves serious consideration.

In addition to obtaining data concerning the epidemiology of

suicide attempts a major purpose of this study was to determine if a female's relationship with her mother was of equal, if not greater, predictive significance in regard to risk for a suicide attempt as compared to her relationship to her father. Cantor (1972), in profiling the female youth suicide attempter, describes a father absent home situation and says the attempter finds it virtually impossible to count on her father. Cantor's work neglected the role that a mother might have in determining a female's risk for a suicide attempt. The data obtained in this study show that the female's relationship with her father is of less predictive value as compared to her relationship with her mother in regard to suicide risk.

The data were coded to reflect whether the subject felt her relationship with her mother, father, and family was relatively stable or troubled. Ten of the 15 (66%) attempters described their relationship with their mother as troubled, significantly more so than the nonattempters, of whom 29% reported troubled relationships with their mother. Seventy-three percent of the attempters described their relationship with their father during adolescence as troubled. Again the difference here between attempters and nonattempters was significant. Forty-one percent of the nonattempters reported troubled relationships with their father during adolescence.

When subjects were asked how they found talking to their father about a problem only 13% of the attempters reported they found it easy, 60% reported finding it difficult and 26% found it impossible. Forty percent of the nonattempters found it easy, 44% found it

difficult, and 12% found it impossible. These differences were significant ($\chi^2(1, N=153)=4.67, p<.05$).

When subjects were asked the same question with regard to their mother, 20% of the attempters found it easy, 53% found it difficult, and 26% found it impossible. Here the difference between the attempters and the nonattempters was significant, with 73% of the nonattempters finding it easy, 24% finding it difficult, and only 2% finding it impossible. Additionally, when asked if they went to their parents for help in times of stress, 53% of the attempters said they did not, compared with 37% of the nonattempters who did not go to their parents.

Based on our findings, it appears the family relationships of female college students who have attempted suicide are characterized by trouble and a lack of emotional support. Further analyses are planned using discriminate function analyses to partial out the variance as to the relative importance of conflicts with the mother, conflicts with the father, or general family disruption. Still, it can be concluded based on our preliminary analyses that there is no support for the contention that an adolescent female's relationship with her father is of any greater importance in regard to her suicide risk than the relationship she has with her mother.

In addition to supporting our assumptions concerning a need to look at the relationship that youthful suicide attempters have with both parents our data provide some initial evidence for the influence of contagion as a factor in youth suicide attempts. While this support should be looked at as quite tentative in nature it surely shows that this is a problem which deserves further empirical

examination. Concerning our data we found that 80% of the attempters reported knowing someone who had ended their life through suicide, this compared to 44% of the nonattempters who reported personally knowing someone who committed suicide. The person who had committed suicide was most often a friend, acquaintance, or schoolmate, both for attempters and nonattempters. One attempter reported that her father had committed suicide, and another reported more than one relative having done so. Two attempters said they knew the person very well and five responded knowing them well.

In addition to providing some support for our two main hypotheses the questionnaire proved to a valuable source of information regarding the epidemiology and circumstances of suicide attempts and suicidal thinking. Some of the more interesting and potentially informative findings are summarized in the following descriptions.

Our data provided support for the supposition that our attempters were generally at higher risk for auto-lethal behavior than nonattempters. That is, the results showed significant differences when comparing attempters and nonattempters in regard to self-destructive behavior such as excessive drinking and drug taking, driving recklessly, and even walking into moving traffic. Ninety-three percent of the attempters reported having drunk excessively, compared to 55% of the nonattempters. Thirty-three percent of the attempters reported taking drugs excessively compared to 10% of the nonattempters. Sixty-six percent of the attempters said that they had driven recklessly compared to 27% of the nonattempters. Furthermore, 33% of the attempters reported walking

into moving traffic compared with 6% of the nonattempters.

Further evidence for self-destructive tendencies among the suicide attempters was their endorsement of the statement that in times of great stress that they were likely to think about suicide in order to kill themselves. Ninety-three percent of the attempters responded in this manner, compared to 30% of the nonattempters.

Interestingly, when asked if they believed suicide was ever an acceptable or legitimate option, 71% of the attempters answered no. They gave such reasons as suicide is a selfish act, it is a cop out, there is a better solution than suicide, it is morally wrong, it is silly, and it is a violent form of escape. One attempter believed suicide could be a legitimate option under certain medical circumstances and three felt it was the individual's right to chose death if they so desired.

Seventy-three percent of the attempters reported having wished they were dead and surprisingly so did 55% of the nonattempters. When asked to explain their answer, such reasons as family problems, non-specific stress, and adjustment problems as a result of moving were given by both attempters and nonattempters. One attempter said she wanted to see what heaven was like and two attempters reported feelings of failure.

It was found that significantly more attempters than nonattempters discussed the topic of suicide with friends. Forty percent of the attempters had discussed suicide occasionally during the past year and 26% had done so frequently. Additionally, 26% of the attempters said they had had to deal with a person who was at suicidal risk, most often a friend, one said a boyfriend, and one

answered themselves.

During times of great stress attempters reported they were very likely to think about attempting suicide for the express purpose of calling attention to their problems or in order to get help. Eighty-six percent of the attempters reported this, as did 30% of the nonattempters. This was a significant difference.

Subjects were asked at what age they first thought of suicide as an option for themselves. Of the attempters in the sample two reported the first thought between the ages of six and ten, six reported between 11 and 15, and seven reported between 16 and 20. The subjects were also asked how old they were when they made their first suicide attempt. Four stated they were between the ages of 11 and 15, nine between 16 and 20, and two between 21 and 25. The relatively early age of the initial attempts of subjects highlights the need to be cognizant of suicide risk of high school and junior high school youth. Furthermore, as Bailey, Schmidt, Berglass, Nichols and Mikeska (1986) found, the risk for suicide attempts of children as young as ten cannot be ignored.

Ten attempters described their attempts as putting their lives in danger. Three reported taking a potentially lethal overdose, two ingested a nonlethal overdose, two overdosed on an unknown lethality, one reported using gas poisoning (a gas space heater), one a diabetic coma, and one reported using multiple methods. Eleven attempters reported having made one suicide attempt, three reported making two to three attempts, and one person reported six to ten attempts.

When asked about the circumstances of their attempts there were

several situations cited. Three said boyfriend problems, two said they were friendless, one said her attempt was due to her husband's extramarital affair, one said because she was anorexic, one wanted to stop hurting emotionally, one said she was a member of a drug ring, and one reported multiple problems. When questioned about the outcome of their attempt three said they were unsuccessful due to lack of adequate means, one reported intervention, one said she got the attention she wanted, four said they got help and one reported things "turned out fine".

As a result of their suicide attempts only seven of the 15 attempters received either counseling, medical intervention, or hospitalization following their attempt. Four subjects received counseling, two were hospitalized, and one was simply seen in the emergency room and discharged. Three of these seven subjects felt their treatment was ineffective.

A number of our attempters indicated that they used suicide as a threat. Reasons given by the five that reported that they used suicide as a threat were to get attention, to get even with someone, and to prevent the breakup of a relationship. Some circumstances given that led to the use of this threat were a husband's extramarital affair, intense personal pain, adjustment problems due to moving, and parental divorce. The responses to the use of the threat of suicide ranged from the threatened person not caring to their trying to help the attempter and thereby providing the attempter the attention they wanted.

There was a similar range of responses to other communications of suicidal thinking by our attempters. The eight who told someone

they were thinking about suicide most often reported that they told a female friend and responses to this suicidal communication ranged from the other person trying to help by showing concern and giving reasons to live, to telling the attempter it was a stupid idea and giving them a "guilt trip" by telling them how much it would hurt others. Most of those who shared their suicidal thinking were satisfied with the response of their confidant. However, in three of the cases the subjects felt that the lack of concern or guilt engendered added to their risk.

This problem of an inappropriate or inadequate response by others is further highlighted by the eight subjects who voluntarily told someone about their attempt after the fact. Six of these females talked to their friends, one to a counselor, and one to her father. Three of the subjects felt that the person they talked with did not understand their situation, three felt guilt over their attempt after talking with someone about it, and two reported feeling they got their life in order after talking it over with someone. Interestingly, for one subject this was the first time she had shared her attempt with anyone.

The feelings of those who talked with someone primarily because their suicide attempt had been discovered were even more negative. This was particularly true in regard to the responses of the person who initially discovered their attempt. One subject reported that the discoverer ignored the attempt, three said help was reluctantly given, two reported anger on the part of the discoverer, and only one reported an offer of help from the discoverer.

The preceding data summarizing the responses of confidants and

discovers shows there is definitely a need for suicide education so people will know how to deal with an attempt successfully and not further aggravate an already bad situation. As Mishara (1982) suggests suicidal behavior in others often brings about feelings which people try to avoid, such as anger, shock, and panic. If we are going to help persons at suicidal risk we must enable the peers and families of these persons to overcome their negative emotional reactions and respond in a more helping and appropriate manner.

CONCLUSIONS

There is no doubt that suicide is a serious problem on our college campuses. If we are to impact this plight we need to study it as a phenomenon in its own right. The magnitude of the problem is shown in part by the fact that nearly one out of every ten subjects in our study reported that she made a suicide attempt. Furthermore, those subjects who reported having made a suicide attempt not only communicated a degree of alienation and aloneness, but they also indicated that they engaged in a variety of risk taking, if not self-destructive, behaviors.

In most cases our attempters had a troubled relationship with her parents. Nothing in our data indicated that difficulties with her father were of any greater importance than the relationship which she had with her mother.

While viewed as tentative in nature our results provided some support for a contagion factor. That is subjects who personally knew someone who had committed suicide were much more likely to be suicide attempters.

Perhaps one of the most important findings of this study was the information obtained concerning the feelings of our subjects regarding the reactions of others concerning their suicide attempts and/or thinking. In general persons who discovered the suicide attempts of our subjects acted in a negative and unhelpful manner. Furthermore, sharing their feelings and fears after the event often times turned out to be an unproductive or aversive experience for our suicide attempters.

Based on our findings it can be concluded that suicide attempts are multiply determined phenomena, and that additional resources need to be expended in informing persons about how to interact with and aid potentially suicidal individuals.

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